

MotorWeek

Natural Gas – Metro Buses

JOHN DAVIS: When it comes to reducing vehicle emissions and breaking our addiction to foreign oil, Compressed Natural Gas fits the bill as a clean, domestic energy source, but CNG has had to struggle to gain a toehold in the private passenger car market.

On the other hand, the clean fuel has gained momentum with municipal fleets. American cities large and small are making the switch to CNG, and they're proving that for many fleets, natural gas is a natural fit.

JOHN DAVIS: Compared to the roughly 190,000 gas stations in the U.S. there are less than 1000 CNG stations and not all of those are open to the public. So with exception from home re-fueling CNG is just not an option yet for most U.S. drivers.

But for captive fleets, those where the vehicles refuel at a central depot and have limited operating areas, natural gas is an ideal clean-energy alternative.

Spurred on by air-quality mandates and federal grants to help buy clean vehicles and build fueling stations, many municipalities have committed to alternative fuels, and especially CNG and LNG, over the past decade, and their efforts are starting to pay big dividends:

For instance, suppose you ride a metro bus to work or school, you certainly won't be alone: There are nearly 70,000 public transport buses in the U.S., operated by 1100 transit agencies. In 2008, they carried 5.6 billion passengers and covered 21.7 billion miles.

Did you know that over 18 percent of those buses are now powered by natural gas? That's up from just 6.2 percent in 1998. In the same time period, the number of Diesel powered buses dropped from 92 to 69 percent.

It will still take years for CNG-powered buses to surpass the number of diesels nationwide, but the wheels are in motion, and in some important areas, that fight has already been won.

Los Angeles County is nearly diesel-free when it comes to metro buses and with over 2000 in daily use, the largest CNG bus fleet in the country, that's no small feat!

It took a commitment by the County and the support of its citizens to strive for a totally alt-fuel fleet.

DAN QUIGG: Because we knew that emissions regulations were going to start affecting transit buses, so which was the best alternative? Natural Gas started looking better for us because the prices were coming down, on the fuel commodity. The con is still, you know, a little bit higher maintenance, and the higher cost of upfront cost of buying the equipment and modifying your facilities to run it.

JOHN DAVIS: All things considered, converting a fleet to run on natural gas is cost-competitive with diesel over the long run.

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Fueling stations, like this one at LA's Division 10 maintenance facility, take CNG straight from the pipeline and compress it on-demand for fueling. Gas leak detectors and other safety systems as well as strict procedures and training for fueling personnel make handling CNG safe. And it takes just 12 minutes to fuel each bus, check the fluids, log its miles and clean out the interior.

Dallas, Fort Worth, Atlanta, Seattle, and our nation's capital are just a few of the big city bus fleets that have begun the switch to clean natural gas. But all across the country, smaller towns are seeing a positive impact from using CNG too.

Airport shuttles, maintenance vehicles, street sweepers, and even passenger cars are displacing millions of gallons of gas and diesel every day.

And renewable sources, like using reclaimed landfill gas to power refuse trucks, are adding innovation to the natural gas mix as well.

The benefits of cleaner air, fuel cost savings and energy security afforded by natural gas are easy to see, and thanks to the efforts of these pioneering fleet operators, it's easier for us to see greener roads ahead.